

THE YUMMY *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER!

JOANNE FLUKE



APPLE TURNOVER MURDER

A Hannah Swensen Mystery with Recipes!

APPLE TURNOVER MURDER

Hannah took a tentative step toward the chair. Yes, it was definitely Bradford, and he must have fallen asleep, because he'd dropped a half-eaten apple turnover on the stage floor.

"Wake up!" They're waiting for you to start the show!" Hannah took a step forward and gave his shoulder a little shake. "Bradford? What's wrong with you?"

There was no answer and she gave him another shake. But instead of jumping to his feet as she expected, Bradford tumbled sideways and his head hit the floor with a hollow thunk.

Hannah didn't need the little voice in her head to warn her that all was not well, and she fumbled her purse for the little flashlight on her keychain. She flicked it on and aimed it directly at his face. Even accounting for the blue LED light that made everyone look ghastly, there was no doubt in Hannah's mind. She'd wished him ill, but not quite *this* ill.

Bradford Ramsey was stone cold dead ...

Books by Joanne Fluke

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STRAWBERRY SHORTCAKE MURDER
BLUEBERRY MUFFIN MURDER
LEMON MERINGUE PIE MURDER
FUDGE CUPCAKE MURDER
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PEACH COBBLER MURDER
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CANDY CANE MURDER
CARROT CAKE MURDER
CREAM PUFF MURDER
PLUM PUDDING MURDER
APPLE TURNOVER MURDER
GINGERBREAD COOKIE MURDER
DEVIL'S FOOD CAKE MURDER

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APPLE TURNOVER MURDER



JOANNE FLUKE



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Chapter One

***This book is for Ruel.
Thanks for Breakfast in a Muffin, honey!***

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In a perfect world, Hannah and I would have an extra day every week just for baking.



Chapter One



“‘Til death do us part.”

The words echoed in the hushed flower-scented air and Hannah Swensen shivered in her bridal finery. The church was filled to capacity on this Sunday afternoon in early June and sunbeams streamed through the stained glass windows that lined the nave, transforming the dust motes that floated on lazy air currents into bits of vividly colored confetti.

‘Til death do us part.

The words were simple, the sentiment was true, and Hannah knew that marriage was supposed to last a lifetime. But hearing such grave words on this joyous occasion always reminded her of a certain opening line in a television murder mystery. In the next shot, the groom would kiss the bride and the whole congregation would mirror their happy smiles. Then the camera would pull back, and the music would change to a minor key. Something was about to happen, something ominous. Someone was going to die before the first commercial break, and you could almost bet that the victim would be one-half of the bridal couple, most likely the actor or actress who was lesser known and lesser paid.

But not today and not here in Lake Eden, Hannah told herself, feeling a bit silly for her dark thoughts on this happy occasion. She could probably blame her overactive imagination on too much work and not enough sleep. Hannah and her partner, Lisa, had put in long hours at The Cookie Jar, their coffee shop and bakery, and their jam-packed schedule was far from completed. They’d baked scores of cookies for graduation celebrations, bridal and baby showers, engagement parties, and school picnics. They’d even baked their signature wedding cookies for this wedding, Old-Fashioned Sugar Cookies topped with glittering crystals of granulated sugar and decorated with the initials of the bride and the groom in frosting, enclosed in a frosting heart. Once the reception line had come to an end, everyone would mingle in the church garden to enjoy iced lemonade and The Cookie Jar wedding cookies.

Hannah was attempting to count the wedding celebrants that filled the pews to make sure they’d brought enough cookies when a warm hand reached out to clasp hers. The hand belonged to Norman Rhodes, son of the bride, Carrie Rhodes, and one of the men she was currently dating. Norman was smiling and he’d told Hannah that he was pleased his mother was marrying a man they all knew and liked, Earl Flensburg.

As Carrie and Earl turned and began their first walk down the aisle together as man and wife, Hannah caught a glimpse of her own mother’s face. Delores Swensen was a study in contrasts, smiling and dabbing at her eyes with a lace handkerchief at the same time. Weddings always made Delores cry. She’d once admitted to Hannah that she’d cried at her own wedding and, much to her embarrassment, smudged her mascara in the process.

Hannah followed Norman out of the pew and down the side aisle toward the front doors of the church. “Are you going to stand in the reception line?”

“I’ll congratulate them later when I make the first toast.” Norman waved and Hannah turned to see Mike Kingston, the other man she occasionally dated, standing on the steps that led up to the church doors. He was still wearing his Winnetka County Sheriff’s Department uniform and that probably

meant he was still on duty. Mike waved back at them and Hannah and Norman went down the steps to greet him.

“Sorry I missed the wedding,” Mike said when they arrived at his side. “I was supposed to be on work an hour and a half ago, but there was a robbery. You’d think in heat like this, the criminals would stay home and fan themselves.”

“What did they steal?” Norman asked.

“A couple of fans?” Hannah guessed, earning long-suffering looks from both men.

“You’re close,” Mike told her. “They stole a truck loaded with one of those above-ground swimming pools.”

“That’s a pretty big thing to steal,” Norman said. “Did you catch them?”

“Sure. The pool was still in the bed of the truck and they were trying to fill it up in the parking lot at the Eagle. You know where that is, don’t you?”

Both Hannah and Norman nodded. They’d rescued Hannah’s youngest sister, Michelle, from the country-western bar last summer when she’d helped them substantiate a suspect’s alibi.

“They were trying to set up the pool at the Eagle?” Hannah asked him.

“*Trying* is the operative word. Since they didn’t have a hose, they recruited everybody at the bar to carry out beer mugs filled with water and dump them in the pool. Lonnie and I figured it would have taken them at least four days to fill it up enough for a swim.”

“So you caught them and arrested them?” Norman asked.

Mike shook his head. “It seems they were drinking buddies with the owner of the truck. And once they agreed to help him unload the pool at his house, and he agreed to let them go for a swim, everybody went off happy. But I missed the wedding and I’m sorry about that.” Mike turned to Norman. “Give your mother and Earl my apologies, okay? And tell them I’ll see them later.”

“Let’s head out to the Lake Eden Inn,” Norman suggested after Mike had left.

Hannah glanced at her dress watch, squinting a bit to read the tiny numbers. She was used to the big dial on the watch she wore at work where time was of the essence and a minute or two more could turn a boiled frosting into concrete. “If we leave now, we’ll be an hour early for the reception.”

“Good. I want to check my video equipment to make sure everything’s working right.” Norman stopped speaking and frowned slightly. “Did I give you the bag of cat treats and toys I bought?”

Hannah turned to smile at him. “Yes, you did. But there’s enough in that bag for a month and you’re only going to be gone for three nights.”

“I know. It’s just that I’ve never left Cuddles before and I wanted to make sure she had everything she needed.”

“But how about the time Marguerite took her up north?” Hannah asked, remembering the vacation Cuddles and her former owner had taken last summer.

“That’s different. I didn’t leave Cuddles. Cuddles left me.” Norman was silent for a moment and then he began to grin. “That sounds a little crazy, doesn’t it?”

“Not a bit. I’d feel the same way.”

Hannah reviewed the plan in her mind as they walked to Norman’s car. Once the reception was over, Norman would be driving his mother and Earl to the international airport in Minneapolis where they would catch a midnight flight to Rome. They were touring Italy for their honeymoon, somewhere Carrie had always wanted to go. Norman would see them off and then he’d drive to the hotel where he’d be staying for three nights. On Monday he’d meet up with some friends from dental school who were opening a clinic in St. Paul, tour the building they’d chosen for their clinic, and then they’d all go out to dinner together. On Tuesday he’d attend the grand opening, stay over that night, and drive

back to Lake Eden Wednesday morning in time for his first appointment. He'd pick up Cuddles the night after work, and his cat would have almost seventy-two hours to spend playing with her best friend, Moishe.

"Do you think we should check on the cats before we drive out to the reception?" Norman asked.

"We can stop at the condo if you're worried about them, but I'm sure they're fine. I filled the Kit Valet with food before we left and Moishe's always been a real gentleman about letting Cuddles eat first. They're probably snuggled up on the couch together, watching the Animal Channel."

"You're right. No sense in disturbing them." Norman opened all four doors of his car to let the heat out before he gestured for Hannah to get inside. "I'll get the air conditioning on right away," he promised.

It was a hot afternoon and Hannah was glad that the air conditioning in Norman's sedan was better than the air conditioning in her cookie truck. Even if she turned it on full blast, someone blowing over the top of an ice cube would be more effective. Riding in Norman's well-maintained car was a welcome treat, and by the time they pulled out of the church parking lot, cool air was already beginning to pour out of the vents. "I just *love* your car!" she said with a sigh, leaning back against the headrest.

The moment the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. They'd just come from a wedding and that meant both of them had weddings on the mind. It would be natural for Norman, who really wanted her to accept the proposal he'd tendered over a year ago, to say, *Marry me and I'll buy you one just like it. Or, Just say yes and I'll make everything easy for you, Hannah. Or even, Did you see how happy Mother was? I'd make you even happier if you'd marry me.*

But Norman didn't say any of those things. Instead, he just laughed. "You don't love my car. You love my air conditioning."

"It's true." Hannah hung her head in pretended shame. "I'm just a fool for a good-looking condenser and powerful vents."

Norman chortled. There was no other word for it. It was a sound that was midway between a chuckle and a gurgle and it made Hannah smile to know she'd caused it. There was no greater gift than making someone laugh. People who laughed were happy.

It was a huge party. Almost everyone they knew in town was there, but the Swensen sisters had found each other and snagged a table. Hannah, Andrea, and Michelle were seated at a rectangular table at the edge of the dance floor. Their mother, Delores, sat at one end, looking no more than a decade older than her daughters.

"And you're going to fill in at Granny's Attic while Carrie's on her honeymoon?" Hannah asked Michelle.

"That's right." Michelle turned to smile at her mother. "I've got a whole month before I have to be back at Macalester, and Mother's promised me a commission on any antiques I sell."

"And an hourly wage on top of that," Delores amended her youngest daughter's statement, and then she turned to Hannah. "Michelle will be able to stay with you for a while, won't she, dear? I'm having the hardwood floors redone and it could take several weeks."

"Not a problem. Michelle can stay with me anytime she wants."

Michelle turned to give Hannah a grin. "Thanks!"

"I should be the one to thank *you*. The last time you stayed over, you made breakfast for me. And the day you left, you stripped your bed and washed the sheets. Not only that, you emptied the drier and folded all my clothes. I *love* it when you stay with me."

All four Swensens looked up as a man stopped by their table. It was Lonnie Murphy, the deputy sheriff Michelle dated when she was in town. “Hi, Shelly. Do you want to dance?” he asked.

“I’d love to!” Michelle smiled, got up from her chair, and took Lonnie’s arm. She looked genuinely delighted to be asked as they stepped out onto the dance floor.

Hannah hid a grin. Michelle hated to be called Shelly. It was the name her fourth grade class had given to the box turtle they kept in their terrarium. She’d once told Hannah she thought that Shelly was a great name for a turtle but not for her, and she’d engaged in several hair-pulling fights on the school playground with anyone who’d dared to call her by that nickname. Obviously things had changed. When Lonnie called her Shelly, Michelle just smiled at him. Hannah figured that must be love, or at least a close facsimile.

“Delores. Just the person I wanted to see.” Bud Hauge approached their table. He owned the welding shop in town and Hannah knew he’d worked on several broken antiques for her mother.

“Bud.” Delores acknowledged him with a nod. “Don’t tell me you can’t weld the rocker on my treadle sewing machine.”

“Okay. I won’t tell you I can’t weld your sewing machine.”

“Bud!” There was a warning tone in their mother’s voice and Hannah exchanged grins with Andrea. Delores had gone to school with Bud and he loved to tease her.

“Just kidding. It’s all ready for you, good as new. I’ll drop it by Granny’s Attic tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, Bud. That’s perfect. I’d like you to take a look at something else we bought. Have you ever done any restoration on grave art?”

Bud gave a little shrug. “I don’t know. They bring it in, I weld it. What’s grave art?”

“It’s a tribute for a grave, a statue or some kind of decoration chosen by the family. Commonly they’re made of marble or granite, but this one is metal.”

“What is it? An angel or something like that?”

“No, it’s a fish.”

“A fish?” Both Andrea and Hannah spoke at once since Bud appeared to be rendered speechless.

“I believe it’s a walleye pike. It’s not so unusual if you consider that families like to personalize the graves of their dearly departed.”

Dearly departed? Hannah stared at her mother in shock. She’d never heard anyone use that phrase outside the walls of a church. “So some dead person inside, whoever he was, liked to fish?”

“I assume so, dear. We have several examples of grave art at the shop. They’re from the family mausoleum section of Spring Brook Cemetery and they date back to the eighteenth century.”

“They’re tearing down part of that section, aren’t they, Mother?” Andrea asked.

“They’re relocating it, dear. The city council feels that the crypts are in such bad repair, they could be dangerous.”

“How could they be dangerous if everyone who’s in them is dead?” Hannah asked.

Andrea and Bud burst into laughter, and Hannah noticed that Delores did all she could do to keep a straight face. “That’s not very nice, dear,” she chided her eldest daughter.

“But it’s funny,” Bud said, still chuckling.

“And it’s true,” Andrea added.

“Well, be that as it may, the council decided to take down the crumbling mausoleums and relocate the ... um ... contents.”

“All of them?” Hannah asked, remembering how she used to ride her bike out to the old part of the cemetery and walk past the giant stone angels and carved headstones. “I used to love the pink granite mausoleum with the columns in the front.”

“That belongs to the Evans family and Florence has agreed to repair it. Four generations of her family are buried there. The problem the council had was with some of the other mausoleums. At least a dozen were unclaimed. Either the families moved to parts unknown, or there are no living relatives.”

“Those are the ones they’re tearing down?” Bud asked.

“That’s right. But some of the grave art can’t be moved to the new gravesites. Either it’s in bad repair or it’s simply too large. Carrie and I are taking whatever we can salvage to sell at Granny Attic and we’ll donate the proceeds to the relocation fund.”

“That’s nice of you, Mother,” Andrea said. “But do you really think that anybody will buy a walleye for a grave?”

“It’s already sold, dear. Winnie Henderson is buying it for her family crypt. She’s kept it up over the years, but she never got around to ordering any kind of decoration.”

“And she wants the walleye?” Bud looked astonished.

“Yes. One of her husbands just loved to hunt and fish. I think it was the third one?”

“I thought it was the fourth,” Hannah said.

“Whatever. Winnie said his fishing buddy wanted all his fishing tackle, so she couldn’t put anything inside. All she had were his hunting things.”

“She put those inside?” Andrea asked.

“Yes, and that’s why she wants the walleye. Winnie wants everyone to know that he was a great fisherman as well as a good hunter.”

“Sounds like what the Egyptians did with the pyramids,” Bud commented. “Does Winnie believe he’ll use them in the afterlife?”

“I don’t know, Bud. Winnie has some strange notions and I didn’t really get into it with her.”

“Wait a second,” Bud said, looking a little worried. “She didn’t put any guns in there, did she?”

“Heavens, no! She kept the guns. She said you never know when you need firearms out on the farm. She shot a lynx last year, right before it attacked one of her calves.”

“Is a lynx the same as a wildcat?” Andrea turned to Hannah. “I always get those two mixed up.”

“A lot of people do. The bobcat’s genus is lynx, but if you’re thinking of the Canadian lynx we see here in Minnesota, they’re twice as big as bobcats, and they have snow-shoe paws.”

Delores laughed. “I don’t think Winnie got close enough to examine its paws.”

“But was the bobcat Winnie shot a Canadian lynx?” Andrea asked.

“Probably,” Bud answered her question, “especially if it was attacking something as big as a calf.”

“Maybe it was a cougar, or a ... a mountain lion.” Andrea was obviously struggling with the nomenclature. “Or don’t we have any of those here?”

“I think cougars are another name for mountain lions,” Hannah told her. “And if I remember correctly, they’re lumped in there somewhere with pumas and panthers.”

“But do we have mountain lions here?” Andrea repeated her question. “We don’t have any mountains in Minnesota.”

“You’re right,” Bud said. “Most of them are farther west, but they migrate over here once in awhile. They’re adaptable, and if there’s not enough food where they are, they go in search of it.”

“Then you think the big cat that Winnie shot might be a mountain lion?” Hannah asked him.

“I doubt it. If you spot a big cat here, it’s probably a Canadian lynx.” He turned to Delores. “Tell me more about that walleye. What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s missing one of its fins. That’s why I asked if you’d ever done any restoration work. Do you think you could fabricate a fin and weld it on?”

“Yes, but only if you dance with me.”

“What?!”

“Only if you dance with me. This is our song ... remember?”

Delores didn't say a word, but she got to her feet and took Bud's arm. Hannah noticed that her mother's cheeks were bright pink as Bud led her to the dance floor and took her in his arms.

“I wonder if Bud's an old flame,” Andrea mused.

“He could be. Mother told me she dated a lot in high school.”

“You mean our mother played the field?”

“You could call it that, I guess. I know she wasn't serious about anyone until Dad came along.”

Both sisters were silent as their mother danced by with Bud. Then Andrea turned to Hannah. “I wonder if she feels lonely now that Carrie's married again.”

“I don't know. She hasn't said anything about it. Then again, she probably wouldn't. Do you want me to ask her?”

“No! That'll only make her think about it, if she's not thinking about it already. It's just that ... I was wondering if we should keep an eye on her ... just in case.”

“Just in case what?”

“Just in case she falls in love again. Remember what happened with Winthrop?”

“I'll never forget it, but I really don't think that'll happen again.”

“Why not?”

“Because Mother's wiser now, and there aren't any new, fascinating men with British accents who've moved to Lake Eden. Mother's known all the eligible local men for years.”

“I know that, but ...”

“Besides,” Hannah went on, “Mother doesn't seem interested in anything but friendship. And the men seem to feel exactly the same way.”

“Really?” Andrea nudged Hannah and gestured toward the dance floor. “Take a good look and tell me that again.”

Hannah scanned the couples on the floor and located Delores dancing with Joe Dietz. Their mother was looking up at Joe and smiling in what Hannah thought could be a mildly flirtatious way. “What's Mother doing with Joe Dietz? I thought she was dancing with Bud!”

“She was, but not anymore. Joe cut in on Doc Knight.”

“Doc Knight? How did Doc Knight get into the picture?”

“Doc cut in on Bud.”

“But it can't be more than a minute since Mother left the table! Are you telling me that she's had three dance partners already?”

“Yes, and number four is on the horizon and approaching fast. Look to your left.”

Hannah followed Andrea's direction and watched as Pete Nunke walked out on the dance floor and made a beeline for Delores and Joe Dietz. There was no doubt that Andrea was correct when Pete tapped Joe on the shoulder.

“See what I mean?” Andrea asked.

“I see.”

Both sisters watched as Joe tried to wave Pete away. There was a moment of good-natured banter between the two men and then Delores said something to Pete. His response caused her to throw back her head and laugh in obvious delight, leaving no doubt that she relished being the belle of the ball at her best friend's wedding.

“Mother's very popular tonight,” Andrea said as Delores went into Pete's arms.

“Yes, she is.”

“From where I’m sitting, she looks as if she’s enjoying every minute of it,” Andrea commented. “and it looks like it could be a little more than simple friendship to me.”

Hannah sighed. Her sister was right. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to keep an eye on Mother, especially since all the bachelors and widowers in Lake Eden seem to be doing the same thing!”



Chapter Two



She was being crushed between two boulders ... except they weren't boulders. They couldn't be boulders. Boulders were hard and cold. These were softer, and they were warm. She couldn't be certain what material they were made of, but she was totally restrained by whatever it was.

Her arms must be bound, or perhaps wedged at her sides, because she couldn't move them. Her legs also seemed to be trussed or contained in some manner. Why was she imprisoned like this? She couldn't remember, and she wasn't even certain that she'd ever been told.

There was a noise in the dark, way in the distance. She struggled to identify it for a moment, and then her mind, which seemed to operate in slow-motion, latched onto an image of a truck. It was the sound of a motor running, perhaps several motors running. Was she about to be moved from this place of confinement and transported to another location?

The rumbling continued, echoing around her, filling her head with questions. How had she been brought here? Who was responsible? And when there were no answers to those questions, her mind turned to others.

How high was high? What made the wind blow? No one could disagree that she was thinking. Did that mean that she existed? But this line of thought was not productive in her current situation. She ought to attempt to find a way to break out of her confinement and not waste time woolgathering.

Woolgathering. The words swirled in her mind, back and forth, around and around. The letters were made up of little puffy balls of cotton wool and it reminded her of sheep the size of kittens. And there was something about kittens, something about the fog creeping in ... but that was cats. And the sheep were ... cats!

"Off!" Hannah ordered, startling the two cats and sending them leaping from the bed. No wonder she'd dreamed about being wrapped up like a mummy! It had gotten cold and damp in the wee hours of the morning. Moishe and Cuddles must have felt the chill, because they'd moved from the living room couch to her bed. There they'd climbed up on her pillow, Moishe on the left and Cuddles on the right, moving closer and closer to her as they slept. For all intents and purposes, she'd ended up with two cats glued tightly to either side of her head.

A glance at the clock on her bedside table made Hannah groan. It was already a quarter to four and she had to get up in forty-five minutes. By the time she made a trip to the bathroom and got back to bed, only forty minutes of sleep time would be left. And by the time she actually calmed down, gave the cats several scratches behind the ears to apologize for startling them, and got back to sleep, it would be almost time to get up again.

And now, just thinking about it and figuring out the times, she was wide awake. No sense even trying for the few additional minutes of sleep that she might possibly gain. It was better to get up and try the recipe her college friend, Beth, had sent her for Vanilla Crack, to see if they could use it at The Cookie Jar. It certainly seemed easy to make and they had nothing else like it on the cookie menu.

By the time the little hand was a smidgen short of the four and the big hand was flirting with the eleven, Hannah emerged from the bathroom squeaky clean. She dressed quickly in the clothing she had set out the previous night, and before the second hand could tick off the remaining three clicks to the

hour, she was ready for the day that had not yet arrived.

~~“Thanks a lot, guys,” she said to the two felines who were now nestled on her pillow, sound asleep~~ and walked down the carpeted hallway toward the kitchen. As she passed the closed guest room door she listened for any sound that might indicate Michelle was awake. Her youngest sister had come home just as Hannah was going to bed, and both of them had been too tired to do more than say goodnight.

When she got to the kitchen, Hannah flicked on the banks of fluorescent lights that turned the white-walled room into the luminance of day, and re-read the recipe she'd received in the mail. It was even easier than she'd remembered, and she had all the ingredients on hand, including a fresh box of soda crackers. Then she set the recipe down on the counter and completed the first step toward a successful baking experience. She poured herself a cup of coffee to wake up.

The first sip was heaven. Hannah gave a deep sigh of pleasure and sank down on one of the plastic-covered chrome tube chairs that would eventually become antiques. Could anything be better than the first cup of coffee in the morning?

Hannah sat there relishing the experience, concentrating on the dark, rich taste. It was full-bodied but not bitter, and that meant the beans had been roasted to perfection. She definitely liked the new coffee Florence Evans, owner of Lake Eden's Red Owl Grocery Store, had ordered for her. It was called Silver Joe's, and they were trying it out at The Cookie Jar this morning. If their customers liked it, they'd switch. And that just went to prove that there was an upside to keeping in touch with old classmates. Who would have guessed that Pat Vota, the bratty boy who had pushed her off the dock every time they'd gone swimming at Eden Lake, would end up as a top executive at a gourmet coffee company?

Once her cup was empty and the morning caffeine had performed its miraculous cure, Hannah poured a second cup and began to gather ingredients. The list was short and consisted of only four items: butter, white sugar, vanilla, and salted soda crackers. Since there was a variation called Chocolate Crack, Hannah also carried a canister of brown sugar and a bag of chocolate chips to the counter. She had just filled a saucepan with butter, sugar, and vanilla when the phone rang.

Hannah turned to glance at the clock. It was four thirty-five. Who would call her this early? Vision of crippling auto accidents, life-threatening medical emergencies, and violent crimes befalling friends and family filled her mind with dread as she rushed over to answer it.

“Hello?” Hannah answered, hoping it was a wrong number. Anything else was likely to announce disaster.

“Good morning, Hannah.”

“Norman?” Hannah could scarcely believe her ears as she recognized the cheery voice. It was Norman, calling her on his cell phone, and he sounded alert and wide awake. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, but I woke up too early. I couldn't sleep without Cuddles.”

And I couldn't sleep WITH Cuddles, Hannah thought, but of course she didn't say it.

“So how did she sleep?” Norman continued.

“Cuddles slept just fine. So did Moishe,” Hannah replied, deciding not to tell him about her rudeness upon awakening with both cats plastered to her head.

“Good. Well ... I'd better let you go then. I know you're probably just getting ready for work.”

Hannah gave a little smile. “Actually, I'm baking. I'm testing a new recipe a friend sent me for Vanilla Crack.”

“Is that a cookie?”

“Not really. I guess you could say it's a cross between a cookie and a candy.”

“Sounds interesting. Will you save one for me when I come to pick up Cuddles on Wednesday night?”

“Of course I will.”

“Okay then. I’d better try to catch a little more sleep. I’m meeting the old gang to take a tour of the clinic this afternoon, and then we’re all going out for dinner.”

“Have fun.”

“I will. It’s been three years since I’ve seen these guys. We’ll probably spend most of the night playing catch-up.”

Hannah said goodbye and hung up the phone feeling envious. Norman was going back to bed. She wished *she* could go back to sleep and get up much, much later.

It didn’t take long to boil the butter and sugar the required amount of time. Hannah had just added the vanilla and poured it over the bed of soda crackers she’d arranged on a cookie sheet when her phone rang again.

It only took a moment to sprinkle on a few pieces of salted nuts, slip the pan into the preheated oven, and set the timer. Hannah managed to answer the phone on the third ring. “Hello?”

“Hannah!” It was Andrea’s voice and she sounded anxious. “I’m sorry to call so early, but I knew you’d be up and I really need to talk to you. It’s about ... oh drat! Bill’s out of the shower and I can’t talk now. I’m showing two houses this morning, but I’ll come in this afternoon, okay?”

“Fine, but ...” Hannah stopped talking when she realized that her sister had hung up. She stood there staring at the receiver for a moment and then she returned it to the cradle. Andrea was usually a late riser. What had happened to get her up before dawn? Or had she been sleepless all night, worrying about something?”

The timer dinged and Hannah removed the pan of Vanilla Crack from the oven. It smelled marvelous. She removed the pieces from the cookie sheet on a wire rack to harden and gave a little smile of satisfaction.

“What smells so heavenly?”

Hannah whirled around to see her youngest sister standing in the kitchen doorway, wearing a red and black checkered nightshirt and pink bunny slippers.

“It’s a new cookie called Vanilla Crack.”

“Vanilla *Crack*?” Michelle’s eyebrows approached the edge of her honey-brown bangs. “Do you know what *crack* is?”

“Of course I know what *crack* is.”

“But you’re still going to call this cookie Vanilla Crack?”

“Yes, I am. There’s no way I’m going to let a slang term invented by a scroungy dope dealer spoil my friend’s cookie name. They’re called Vanilla Crack, and Chocolate Crack, because the syrup is poured on crackers. And anybody who objects to the use of a perfectly good English word because illiterate criminals use it is an idiot!”

Michelle backed up a step and held up her hands, palms facing Hannah. “Okay. Forget I mentioned it. You’re absolutely right. I just didn’t know if you knew that it might have negative connotations. It smells divine, though. I think I’ll try a piece for breakfast, if that’s all right with you.”

“For *breakfast*?!” Hannah heard her own words, more than a little censorious, echoing back to her. It wasn’t that long ago she’d been a college student like Michelle, and she’d eaten cold pizza for breakfast. On the scale of nutritional correctness, was a piece of Vanilla Crack that much lower than a piece of cold pepperoni pizza?

“Hannah? Can I try a piece of Vanilla Crack for breakfast?”

“It’s *may* I. And yes, you may. Let me know how you like it while I start on the Chocolate Crack. And be careful. It hasn’t had long to cool and it could be too hot to eat.”

Michelle reached out to touch the confection on the cooling racks while Hannah arranged graham crackers on another cookie sheet. Then she put butter and brown sugar into her saucepan and brought it to a boil. She boiled it for the required five minutes, poured it over the graham crackers on the cookie sheet, and slipped the sheet in the oven. She’d just measured out the chocolate chips she’d need once it finished baking when she noticed that there was a large empty space on the cooling rack. “You’ve already eaten a quarter of a pan?” she asked Michelle.

“I guess I was hungry,” Michelle said a bit sheepishly. “It was great, Hannah. It’s just like a flaky candy bar. Is the Chocolate Crack almost done? I’d like to taste that, too.”

“Ten minutes in the oven, five minutes to cool, and you can have a taste ... or maybe another quarter-pan. You’re pretty wide awake for someone who didn’t get home until after midnight last night. I thought you said Lonnie had to work a swing shift.”

“He did work a swing shift. And before he went to the sheriff’s station, he dropped me off at the community college. It was jazz night at the Cave,” Michelle named the little bistro on campus that hosted student entertainment in the evenings, “and I met some friends. I caught a ride here with one of them.”

“Oh.” Hannah turned away to hide her worried expression. She hoped the friends Michelle had mentioned at the college didn’t include Bradford Ramsey. She’d been meaning to warn Michelle about the unscrupulous professor ever since her youngest sister had invited him to Christmas Eve dinner, but the time had never seemed right. Hannah supposed now was as good a time as any, but the thought of imparting such an embarrassing confidence at shortly after five in the morning made her courage shrink up and her voice turn mute.

“What is it?” Michelle asked, locking eyes with Hannah. “You look ... pained. Is it the coffee on an empty stomach?”

“Heavens, no!” Hannah said, and changed the subject quickly. “That reminds me ... what do you think of the coffee? We’re trying a new brand at The Cookie Jar and I brought some home to test.”

“It’s really good. I like it better than the old kind. But you haven’t told me what’s wrong?”

Hannah sighed. She supposed she really should answer Michelle. She steeled herself to introduce the subject, but just as she was about to speak, the phone rang. “Oops. I’d better get that,” she said and grabbed the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi, Hannah. It’s Mike. I’m not calling too early, am I?”

“I’ve been up for an hour, Mike,” Hannah answered, using his name deliberately so that Michelle would know who it was.

“Tell him hi from me,” Michelle said, hopping up from her chair. “I’m going to go get dressed. By that time, the Chocolate Crack should be cool enough to try.”

“Did she say Chocolate *Crack*?” Mike asked, and Hannah could hear the shock in his voice.

“That’s right. It’s a new recipe. And I do know what *crack* is. This crack refers to one of the ingredients, crackers, and I’m not about to change the cookie name because some criminals use it for drug slang.”

“Okay. Okay. I just wanted you to know, that’s all.” Mike backed off quickly. “Have you heard from Norman?”

“Yes, at four thirty-five this morning. He told me he couldn’t sleep well without Cuddles.”

“That figures. It’s all a matter of habit. When I was growing up, I slept in a room with my older brothers. When they moved out, it took me a week before I could sleep through the night. It was just

too quiet, you know?”

~~“I do know. So what’s up, Mike? You don’t usually call this time of the morning just to chat.”~~

Mike gave a little laugh. “You know me too well, and you’re right. Do you know where Norman is staying in the Cities?”

“No, and I didn’t ask him when he called. I should have, but I guess it was just too early to operate on full brainpower.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Do you want me to ask if he calls again? He’ll probably get in touch with me sometime this evening.”

“That’ll be too late. I need to call and ask him where he hides his extra key.”

“Which key?”

“His house key. I know he hides one somewhere outside.”

“Did Norman tell you that?”

“No, but almost all the homeowners do it. It could be nasty if you got locked outside by accident in the winter.”

“True,” Hannah said and then she was silent. She wasn’t about to give away Norman’s hiding place until she knew more about why Mike needed that information.

“So do you know where he hides it?”

“Yes. Why do you want to know?”

“One of Norman’s neighbors was driving by on her way to work the early shift at DelRay this morning, and she saw a light flick off upstairs. She knew that Norman was gone, so she called the police station to report it.”

“That was nice of her.”

“Yes, it was. It’s probably a light on a timer or something like that, but I’m driving out there to check it out. I’ll jimmy a window or something if I have to, but it’d be a lot easier if I had a key.”

“Of course it would. I’ve got a key here, but it’ll be a lot faster if you drive straight out there and use Norman’s hidden key. There’s a concrete statue of a moose under the pine tree to the left of the front door. The key’s in its mouth.”

“Wow!” Mike was clearly impressed. “That’s a great hiding place. I never would have thought to look there. Most people hide their keys under flowerpots on the front porch, or they’ve got one of those silly little rocks that’s hollowed out to hold a key.”

Hannah frowned. Mike had just described the rock she had in her planter by the front door. “Do criminals know about those rocks?”

“Sure they do. And just in case they’re not smart enough to figure it out, all they have to do is flip the rock over and it says, *Hide-A-Key* on the flap that slides over the hole.” Mike stopped speaking for a moment and then he chuckled. “Don’t tell me you’ve got one of those!”

“Not anymore.”

“Good. Thanks for the information, Hannah. I’ll check out Norman’s house right away.”

“I’ll be leaving for work in just a couple of minutes. Will you call me on my cell phone if there’s anything wrong?”

“Sure, but you’ll have to remember to turn it on.”

“I’ll turn it on,” she promised, more than a little amused. She had a habit of turning off her cell phone when she didn’t want to receive calls and forgetting to turn it back on again.

“Do you want to go out for a burger tonight after I finish my shift?”

An outsider to their complicated relationship might have thought that Mike was following the o

adage, *Make hay while the sun shines*, and taking advantage of the fact that Norman was out of town, Hannah knew that simply wasn't true. If Mike felt like asking her to go out for a burger, he'd ask her whether Norman was in town, or not.

"That sounds nice," she responded. "What time?"

"I'll pick you up at your place at six, and we'll run out to the Corner Tavern. They've got a new burger with peanut butter and peppers inside. It comes with something called an onion bouquet, and I want to try it."

Hannah said goodbye, and when she hung up the receiver, she was smiling. She was still smiling after she'd taken the Chocolate Crack out of the oven, sprinkled the top with chocolate chips, and spread them out into a frosting with a spatula. When she'd first met Mike, she'd suspected that he was a meat and potatoes man, a typical Midwesterner who hadn't strayed far from the cuisine his parents and grandparents had enjoyed. And then he'd met her and his world had changed, although the question was still out on whether it was for the better, or the worse.

It had all started with the Jalapeno Brownies she'd baked for him and left on his desk at the sheriff's station in retaliation for saying that someone else's brownies were the best he'd ever tasted. But like many attempts to retaliate, this one had turned out to be a joke ... on her! Mike had loved the brownies and Hannah credited them for opening up his eyes to the exciting possibilities of unorthodox food combinations. On the other hand, her fiery hot brownies could have permanently shocked his taste buds into complete passivity, leaving him completely open to sampling any gastronomic innovation, worthy or not.

VANILLA CRACK

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F., rack in the middle position.

- 1 box salted soda crackers. (*I used Saltines*)
- 2 sticks salted butter (*1 cup, 8 ounces, ½ pound*)
- 1 cup white (*granulated*) sugar
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- ½ cup salted nut pieces

Line a 10-inch by 15-inch cookie sheet with heavy-duty foil. If you have a jellyroll pan, that's perfect. If you don't, turn up the edges of the foil to form sides.

Spray the foil with Pam or other nonstick cooking spray. (*You want to be able to peel it off later after the cookies harden.*)

Cover the pan completely with a single layer of soda crackers, salt side up. (*You can break the crackers in pieces to make them fit if you have to.*) Set the cracker-lined jellyroll pan or cookie sheet aside while you cook the topping.

Combine the butter with the white sugar and vanilla in a heavy saucepan. Bring it to a full boil over

medium high heat on the stovetop, stirring constantly. ***(A full boil will have breaking bubbles all over the surface of the pan.)*** Boil it for exactly five (5) minutes, stirring it constantly. If it sputters too much, you can reduce the heat. If it starts to lose the boil, you can increase the heat. Just don't stop stirring.

Pour the mixture over the soda crackers as evenly as you can.

Hannah's Note: I start by pouring the mixture in lines from top to bottom over the length of the pan. Then I turn it and pour more lines over the width of the pan. Once the whole pan is cross-hatched with the hot toffee mixture, I pour any that's left where it's needed. If it doesn't cover the soda crackers completely, don't worry—it'll spread out quite a bit in the oven.

Sprinkle the salted nut pieces over the top.

Slide the pan into the oven and bake the cookies at 350 degrees F. for ten (10) minutes.

Remove the pan from the oven and let it cool on a wire rack.

When the cookies have thoroughly cooled, peel off the foil and break them into random-size pieces.

CHOCOLATE CRACK

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F., rack in the middle position.

1 box graham crackers. ***(I used Nabisco Honey Maid)***

2 sticks salted butter ***(1 cup, 8 ounces, ½ pound)***

1 cup brown sugar ***(pack it down when you measure it)***

2 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips ***(12-ounce package)***

Line a 10-inch by 15-inch cookie sheet with heavy-duty foil. If you have a jellyroll pan, that's perfect. If you don't, turn up the edges of the foil to form sides.

Spray the foil with Pam or another nonstick cooking spray. ***(You want to be able to peel it off later, after the candy hardens.)***

Line the pan completely with a single layer of graham crackers. Cover the whole bottom. ***(You can break the crackers in pieces to make them fit if you have to.)*** Set the cracker-lined jellyroll pan or cookie sheet aside while you cook the toffee mixture.

Combine the butter with the brown sugar in a saucepan. Bring it to a boil over medium high heat on the stovetop, stirring constantly. ***(A full boil will have breaking bubbles all over the surface of the pan.)*** Boil it for exactly five (5) minutes, stirring it constantly. If it sputters too much, you can reduce the heat. If it starts to lose the boil, you can increase the heat. Just don't stop stirring.

Pour the mixture over the graham crackers as evenly as you can.

Hannah's Note: I start by pouring the mixture in lines from top to bottom over the length of the pan. ~~Then I turn it and pour more lines over the width of the pan.~~ Once the whole pan is cross-hatched with the hot toffee mixture, I pour any that's left where it's needed. If it doesn't cover the crackers completely, don't worry—it'll spread out quite a bit in the oven.

Slide the pan into the oven and bake the cookies at 350 degrees F. for ten (**10**) minutes.

Remove the pan from the oven and sprinkle the chocolate chips over the top. Give the chips a minute or two to melt and then spread them out as evenly as you can with a heat-resistant spatula, wooden paddle, or a frosting knife.

Slip the pan in the refrigerator to chill.

When the pan has chilled, peel the foil from the cookies and break them into random-sized pieces.



Chapter Three



“Nothing succeeds like excess,” Hannah said, looking up from her position behind the counter at the Cookie Jar as Mayor Richard Bascomb and his wife, Stephanie, came in the door.

Hannah’s partner, Lisa, took one look at the female half of Lake Eden’s first couple and burst out laughing, a gaffe she quickly covered by pretending to cough. Stephanie Bascomb was resplendent in a bright blue suit of raw silk with a stylish blue hat. Her frilly blouse matched the blooms on her hat, which Hannah identified as slightly more purple than the cornflowers growing wild in Winnie Henderson’s back forty. The first lady’s gloves were bright-blue leather and her chic leather pumps were of the same hue. A large sapphire surrounded with diamonds graced her right hand and she wore a matching set of necklace and earrings.

“Hannah! And Lisa!” Mrs. Bascomb greeted them with the same surprised tone she might have used if she were traveling and happened to run into them at a Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka.

Hannah exchanged puzzled glances with Lisa. Where else would they be during the hours the Cookie Jar was open for business?

“Good to see you, Mayor,” Hannah said, and then she turned to the woman who spared no expense buying herself a stunning new outfit every time she found out about one of her husband’s dalliances. The mayor’s last peccadillo must have been particularly flagrant to warrant a suit, hat, gloves, shoes, and a fortune in gemstones. “You’re a vision in blue, Stephanie.”

“Do you like it?” Stephanie asked, twirling around so that Hannah could see the flared skirt below the impeccably tailored jacket.

“I just love that color,” Hannah answered truthfully, neglecting to mention that it was indeed possible to get too much of a good thing. Stephanie was living proof that the concept of overkill could be applied to fashion.

Stephanie turned to Lisa. “How about you, Lisa? Do you like my new outfit?”

Hannah waited breathlessly for Lisa’s answer. Her partner, well known for hating to hurt anyone’s feelings, would have to think fast on this one.

“It’s stunning,” Lisa said, and Hannah mentally congratulated her young partner for choosing a word with several shades of meaning. “Wherever did you get it?” Lisa continued breathlessly. “Unless, of course, you’re keeping that secret to yourself.”

“Well ...” Stephanie considered it for a moment. “It’s a new, very exclusive shop at the mall. You have to know someone to get in. Everything they have is incredibly expensive ...” Stephanie turned to her husband. “But I do think it’s worth it, don’t you, Richard?”

“Yes, definitely worth it,” the mayor pronounced, smiling at his wife. “Aren’t you going to tell them the secret about your charity gala, my sweetness?”

My sweetness! Hannah stared hard at their town’s most indiscreet Romeo. Although she didn’t usually place much credence in gossip, she might have to ask her mother about the mayor’s most recent transgression. De-lores was the founding member of what Hannah called *The Lake Eden Gossip Hotline*, and in a town the size of Lake Eden, everyone knew everything about everybody. It was possible to keep a three-way secret, but only if two of the three people were permanently billeted

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